

## President's Report 2020

Under normal circumstances, at the AGM, office bearers would be delivering reports to the membership about how we're travelling as a company and reflecting on the theatrical year past. But 2020 was no normal year. We certainly didn't do much theatre-ing!

Once the true risks associated with the global pandemic became known, the Committee acted swiftly to cancel the remainder of the 2020 season. In some ways, this decision was both the hardest decision to make (imagine going the rest of the year without theatre!), but in some ways it was the easiest decision to make. Taking advice from the government, as well as those with relevant expertise within the theatre community (shout out to Prof George Werther!), we knew in March that it was too risky for us to continue to operate.

This then set in train the mind-bogglingly difficult task of refunding subscriptions and ticket sales. We were humbled and grateful for the number of our subscribers who found themselves in a position to not require a refund. We know that for many, money is very tight at the moment – so to those who were able to assist us through refusing a refund, we are very grateful. Special mention to Bob Harsley and Brian Christopher who successfully completed the refunds process. This was a huge and imposing task, and it was handled with efficiency and good grace.

As the Secretary will detail in her report, the Committee continued to meet during the lock-down period, via various e-meeting technologies. We continued to receive our usual reports, to ensure that the company was still functioning appropriately, and that governance duties continued to be fulfilled.

Perhaps the most noteworthy outcome of 2020 is that we were able to progress our refurbishment program while the theatre was empty. The company is especially grateful to our architect Gaetano Santo, and our builder/project manager Bevan Uren. Both these gentlemen ramped up their already significant efforts once it became obvious that 2020 would be a great year to get capital works done. At the time of writing, the works continue, we are very much looking forward to seeing the completed product!

We also take this opportunity to acknowledge the contribution of the federal government's Stronger Communities Grants – which enabled us to augment the significant fundraising effort that had been going on over the previous 18 months – and ensure that the fit-out for the refurbished bits of the theatre are really something special.

Committee focus for the second half of the year has turned to reopening.

In considering when it will be safe to have WLT operating again, the Committee has taken a two-pronged approach – how do we keep our audiences safe, and how do we keep those who work with us safe. These are very different considerations – but the underlying theme of both, of course, is safety. This has always been, and always will be, the core driver of our decisions.

We will shortly be making a number of decisions around how many people we can fit in our new foyer, in the courtyard spaces etc. All of this will be dictated by our COVID Safe Plan – which every business is required to have. This plan will also lay out plans as to how to get people safely into and out of the auditorium, how the queueing system for the kiosk will have to work, how set builds will happen etc. I acknowledge the outstanding work of Tony Tartaro in ensuring WLT is up to speed in this ever-changing area.

In terms of keeping those who work with us safe, we are acutely conscious that some plays are more COVID safe than others. Our Play Selection Committee has continued to do an amazing job of identifying which of the plays we were meant to be doing in 2020/2021 are safe (or, at least, safer than others) to rehearse, and safe to perform. In 2021 at least, we will be prioritising those that tick the most boxes of being COVID safe – to make sure our casts, crews and design teams are kept safe.

Over the course of 2020, two stalwarts of the theatre have opted to wind back their workloads. Ellis Ebell decided to stand aside from the Committee after decades of magnificent service, and Frank Page announced his retirement from the editorship of Cues & News. We recognise and celebrate their immense contributions to the company over a significant period of time.

Looking forward, while we hope that 2021 will be somewhat more predictable than 2020, there is no doubt we will be operating under a 'new normal'. For example, we will not be offering subscriptions for 2021, instead we'll be selling tickets to each show, one at a time. And our COVID-safe plan will dictate how we go about our work in 2021. There are challenging times ahead, but the company is well placed to weather these brewing storms.

It is appropriate that this new normal and our new space be matched by renewed leadership. I believe it is timely for me to stand down as Pres, and let someone else lead the company into its next 75 years. Thank you all for the love and support you've shown me over the past 8 years.

My Committee colleagues and I are immensely grateful to our members, life members and subscribers for their ongoing support. Your patience, support and understanding over the next 12 months will be more critical than ever.

Peter Newling

President